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Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States*

Report of the Secretary-General

CONTENTS

	Paragraphs	Page
INTRODUCTION	1	2
I. MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS AND UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS	2 - 15	2
A. Areas reviewed by the Commission on Sustainable Development	2 - 12	2
B. Other priority areas	13 - 15	6
II. PROMISING CHANGES	16 - 21	6
III. EMERGING PRIORITIES	22 - 27	8

* The present report reviews progress made in the implementation of the objectives set out in the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, taking into account the decisions taken by the Commission on Sustainable Development on this subject at its fourth session, in 1996. The report was prepared by the Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development of the United Nations Secretariat, as task manager, in accordance with arrangements agreed to by the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development. It is the result of consultation and information exchange between United Nations agencies, international and national organizations, interested government agencies, and a range of other institutions and individuals.

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IV. RECOMMENDATIONS..... 28 - 29 9

INTRODUCTION

1. The present report provides a brief account of the progress made, or lack thereof, in addressing the particular sustainable development concerns of small island developing States since the conclusion of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (Bridgetown, Barbados, 25 May-6 June 1994). The report identifies areas calling for priority attention, reviewing the state of implementation principally - although not exclusively - in a number of key priority areas reviewed by the fourth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development on the basis of reports prepared by Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD) task managers. Those key areas are: coastal area management, tourism, energy resources, air transport, maritime transport, telecommunication development, management of natural and environmental disasters, resource flows and international trade of small island developing States. The report highlights the salient features of reports of the Secretary-General presented to the General Assembly since the Conference on action taken, particularly by the United Nations system, to implement the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. The report also highlights the relevant resolutions and decisions of the Commission and the General Assembly. In addition to the present report, reports on implementation of the Programme of Action in the Pacific and the Caribbean are expected to be submitted for the consideration of the Commission and the General Assembly at its special session.

I. MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS AND UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

A. Areas reviewed by the Commission on Sustainable Development

2. Since only a short time has elapsed since the adoption of the Programme of Action by the Conference and its endorsement by the General Assembly in 1994, the present review is a mid-term exercise only. A full review of the Programme of Action is scheduled for 1999. For that exercise, a more thorough assessment of the impact of policies and measures implemented since the Conference will be undertaken.

3. The importance attached to disaster mitigation by small island developing States at the national and regional levels, coupled with the importance attached to natural and environmental disasters in both the Programme of Action and the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action have led to concerted action to deal with natural disasters. Small island developing States have sought to build and strengthen institutional and human resource capacities in disaster preparedness and mitigation at the national and local levels, supported by actions at the regional level. Several small island developing State Governments have adopted legislation and planning policies to better manage habitat development in disaster-prone areas. A set of hurricane resistant building codes and standards, initially prepared for the small island States of the Eastern Caribbean, was introduced to other States of that region and other small island developing State regions. Significant support has been provided in disaster mitigation, preparedness and emergency relief management to countries of the

Caribbean and the Pacific, through the Caribbean Disaster Mitigation Project (CDMP) and the South Pacific Disaster Reduction Programme (SPDRP). International support has been provided in a number of areas, mainly through technical assistance and emergency aid. Some assistance has been provided by bilateral sources, mainly for funding regional disaster mitigation programmes.

4. The efforts of small island developing States in this area are hampered by critical shortcomings, the most important of which is their inability to adequately finance disaster preparedness and mitigation efforts on their own. National efforts remain critically underfunded, with few countries having in place any form of national emergency fund. And such progress as has been made to date is generally restricted to natural disaster preparedness, mitigation and relief. Little progress has been made in putting in place measures for coping with major environmental disasters. The potential danger posed by the frequent passage of commercial vessels, and on occasion vessels carrying hazardous, toxic and radioactive wastes through the high seas surrounding a number of small island developing States, continues unattenuated.

5. Small island developing States have made some progress in transport and communication, but such progress is not evenly spread across all countries and regions. Some regions, such as the Caribbean, appear to be moving in the right direction in terms of regional cooperation in air transport. Small island developing States of that region, in collaboration with some continental States, have agreed to examine the existing regulatory and operational frameworks for air transport, as well as the scope for group negotiation of air services agreements. The Caribbean Economic Community (CARICOM) has established a multilateral air services agreement among its member States, and plans to conduct a comprehensive study with a view to the preparation of a strategic development plan for the sector. In the African region, small island developing States continue to maintain separate arrangements in air transport. Some have either international services of their own or are serviced by major international carriers, but often with infrequent schedules. While consideration has been given to dealing with the air transport problems of the Pacific, specific proposals are yet to emerge. The withdrawal of major international airlines from serving that region has resulted in increased cooperation among some national airlines, which are mostly government-owned, and between them and the airlines of New Zealand and Australia. Heads of State in the region have identified this as an area for future cooperation. According to available financial information, the majority of national airlines of small island developing States appear to be unprofitable and rely on State subsidies for operation. A matter of concern is that many small island developing States have not indicated their compliance with or differences from the International Standards and Recommended Practices annexed to the Convention on International Civil Aviation.

6. In maritime transport, most small island developing States have yet to acquire national shipping lines. A number of them function as registry States. While that arrangement contributes to foreign-exchange earnings and employment, it does not adequately serve their trading requirements. In general, small island developing States continue to face considerably higher per-unit shipping costs, and suffer from infrequency of services because of their remoteness and relatively smaller cargo volumes. Most small island developing States are

lagging in the development of port infrastructure and in the use of modern shipping fleets equipped with containers, because of the high outlays involved. However, inter-island shipping on a smaller scale, mostly privately owned, is progressing at a reasonable pace in some archipelagic small island developing States.

7. In the area of telecommunications, several small island developing States still have only rudimentary networks and services. However, a number of others had established reasonably well developed telecommunication networks and services even prior to the Conference. But this achievement has generally not been replicated in rural areas and outer islands. The large outlays necessary for the development of infrastructure continue to hinder the development of telecommunications in some, and the extension of services to rural areas and outlying islands in others. Generally, small island developing States face inordinate operational difficulties because of inadequate technically qualified human resources, poor infrastructure and installation, and deficient planning. Those that are prone to natural disasters experience even greater difficulties. The occurrence of a single major disaster has been known to cause wholesale damage to telecommunication infrastructures, severely setting back progress. In terms of the use of and access to new communication services, several small island developing States have connected to the Internet and others are in the process of doing so. However, extensive access by residents to Internet services is constrained by the high cost of computers and high user fees. The ability to exchange information and data among small island developing States and between small island developing States and other countries has yet to become a reality. The progressive development of the Small Island Developing States Network (SIDSNET) will, it is hoped, speed up that process.

8. In recent years, the tourism sector of small island developing States has grown perceptibly, but efforts to promote sustainable tourism have only just begun. Some countries with mature tourism sectors have experienced severe environmental stress as a result of unregulated developments in the past. Several of those countries have taken initiatives to effect greater controls, particularly in spatial planning and development, in order to cope with problems of pollution, waste and coastal area management. Some have also explored the possibility of promoting eco-tourism. However, despite improvements in legislative and institutional frameworks and the institution of mandatory requirements for environmental impact assessments for new tourism investments in some, small island developing States continue to face considerable difficulties in dealing with problems of waste management and pollution due to poor infrastructural, technological and human resource capacity. Inadequate port reception facilities for handling ship-generated waste from cruise ships and oil spills by oil tankers, and pollution from both land-based and marine sources remain areas of great concern. A total of 15 small island developing States are parties to the Protocol of 1978 Relating to the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships. They thus have obligations under the Convention to establish port reception facilities for the collection of waste, but are hampered by lack of resources for establishing such facilities.

9. The goals of the Programme of Action for developing renewable energy resources remain largely unfulfilled. Fossil fuels at higher unit cost than in larger countries account for more than 50 per cent of the energy needs of small

island developing States. While the use of renewable sources of energy has increased in a number of small island developing States, the share of renewable sources in total energy supply remains significantly below potential. The disappointing results in the utilization of renewable energy sources are attributable mainly to a lack of information on the economic and technical viability of the technologies in small island developing States, and unaffordable prices of existing technologies, especially solar energy technology. There is little evidence of the provision of international support for the development of alternative sources of energy in small island developing States. Information on the extent to which small island developing State authorities have emphasized this area as a priority in their sustainable development policy is also very limited.

10. In the area of trade, small island developing States are concerned about the impact on their exports of the widespread adoption of economic systems based on market forces, the emergence of regional trading blocs, and the erosion of trade preferences as the outcomes of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations are gradually implemented. There is still little evidence of policy reorientation towards developing new areas of export growth by most small island developing States. Most continue to rely on agriculture, tourism, and in a few cases textiles and mining. In view of their limited human resources, considerable efforts will be needed to adapt export production to changing market conditions.

11. Overall, financing for implementation of the Programme of Action through bilateral or multilateral resource flows has declined over the period 1991-1994. In terms of distribution, multilateral flows have been more evenly spread among small island developing States than bilateral flows, which over the same period have tended to favour a smaller number of countries. External resources have been channelled predominantly to the areas of human resource development, national institutions and administrative capacity, land resources, and transport and communication. For their part, most small island developing States face the reality of constrained domestic savings and public revenue potential due to a number of factors, notably the small size of their economies and the imperative of granting tax holidays and exemption from import and export duties to foreign investors in order to attract and retain foreign capital, which accounts for significant proportions of investments in major sectors, such as tourism, textiles and in some cases mining.

12. A significant achievement at the international level has been the establishment of new mechanisms by most of the relevant organizations of the United Nations system, in response to the call of the General Assembly in its resolution 49/122 to oversee and coordinate the implementation of the Programme of Action. Equally significant has been the extension by IACSD of the system of task managers for carrying out in-depth studies on substantive areas of the Programme of Action for the benefit of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

B. Other priority areas

13. The present section gives a brief assessment of progress in the programme areas that have not yet been separately reviewed by the Commission in the context of the Programme of Action. It is based on information contained in the reports of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on action taken mainly by agencies of the United Nations system to implement the Programme of Action. Other areas in that category not mentioned here are dealt with in section III below. Since those programme areas have not been separately reviewed by the Commission in the context of the Programme of Action, no policy recommendations for future action specific to small island developing States have been made by the Commission. However, many of the decisions of the Commission apply to small island developing States as well.

14. The available information indicates that a number of small island developing States have benefited over the past three years from assistance by a number of international agencies in several areas. Some United Nations agencies have promoted projects and programmes in capacity-building and human resource development in their activities under the Programme of Action. Several training programmes and workshops have been held and various forms of assistance provided in institutional capacity-building in small island developing States. In the area of waste management, assistance has been targeted at improving human resources and institutional capacity. Some of the projects have taken the form of imparting knowledge of best practices in pollution control and assessment, aimed at mitigating coastal and marine pollution problems.

15. In the area of freshwater resources, technical assistance has been provided to several small island developing States of the Pacific and the Caribbean for training in water quality assessment and monitoring, for collection and analysis of data, and for establishing guidelines for water resources management. In the area of land resources, agricultural advisory services and credit facilities have been provided, particularly for the benefit of rural women, as well as training in land resource management in a number of small island developing States. Several small island developing States have collectively or individually developed programmes and projects in biodiversity resource assessment, protection and conservation. Some assistance has also been provided through external sources in those endeavours.

II. PROMISING CHANGES

16. One area of promising change is the degree to which regional intergovernmental bodies have engaged themselves in the process of implementation. The intergovernmental bodies of the Pacific region have embarked on a number of specific initiatives, such as the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme; the Regional Marine Turtle Conservation Programme; and the adoption in 1995 of the Waigani Convention on Hazardous Wastes. The South Pacific Forum, at its meeting in September 1996, adopted a decision to convene meetings of Forum economic ministers in order to further strengthen regional cooperation for accelerating sustainable development. Transport issues have been identified for consideration by the Forum and could lead to major new initiatives for regional cooperation in that area. Tourism

development in the region is likely to benefit from regional policy developments in air transport.

17. Caribbean small island developing States, as well as small island developing States that are members of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), have taken several actions in priority areas for those regions. In particular, joint proposals by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and CARICOM for creating regional mechanisms for cooperation in implementation and monitoring are promising signs. Regional air transport initiatives, particularly those mentioned above in the Caribbean, are likely to support achieving the goals of the Programme of Action in that area. Small island developing States that are members of the IOC have begun to deal collaboratively through programmes in coastal area management, pollution control and waste management.

18. Furthermore, initiatives have been taken at the regional level by ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean for the establishment of an information database to service small island developing States in that region. In the Pacific, the Pacific Operations Centre of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific has also begun to set up a Regional Monitoring Information System for Pacific small island developing States, based in Vanuatu, which will be designed to improve the collection, storage and retrieval of data on social, economic, environmental and other developments. Those initiatives promise to narrow the gap in information needs.

19. Developments in a number of major international processes in the area of environment also augur well for future progress in implementation of the Programme of Action. The Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, the International Coral Reef Initiative, and the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities are all developments that could bring about major benefits for small island developing States.

20. The adoption of the Programme of Action has itself resulted in the promotion of greater awareness, within and outside small island developing States, of the extent of the environmental challenges confronting those States. That awareness has begun to stimulate Governments and communities in small island developing States, including young people, the private sector and other major groups, to take sustainable development initiatives.

21. The Department for Policy Coordination on Sustainable Development of the United Nations Secretariat has begun work on the development of a vulnerability index for small island developing States, in close consultations with various United Nations and non-United Nations bodies, representatives of member States of the Alliance of Small island States (AOSIS) and relevant experts. A draft background paper on various conceptual aspects of the vulnerability issue has been prepared by the Department. A revised version of that paper, together with separate reports on the economic and ecological vulnerabilities of small island

developing States to be prepared by consultants, will form the basis for discussions by an expert group meeting scheduled for the second half of 1997.

III. EMERGING PRIORITIES

22. Future priorities in implementation will vary from one country to another and from one region to another. Across all small island developing States, however, a major area of concern will continue to be the impact of climate change and sea level rise on coastal areas, and the consequent need for costly remedial and protective measures.

23. The years since the conclusion of the Conference have witnessed an increasing expression of those concerns by small island developing States Governments. Some have embarked on reorienting policies and programmes, either unilaterally or in collaboration with regional partners, in attempts to deal with the consequences of sea level rise and to preserve important coastal and marine resources. But the individual and collective efforts of small island developing States have so far made little or no real impact on the magnitude of the problems facing them, including the more frequent occurrence of hurricanes, storm surges and coastal inundation, and the resulting loss of valuable economic resources and marine biodiversity stocks. As a longer-term solution, AOSIS has proposed a protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that calls for the adoption of stricter targets for emissions control by the year 2005.

24. Cutting across all areas of the Programme of Action will be the need to ensure greater collaboration among small island developing States and between small island developing States regions, especially in the exchange of experiences and information and in the development of common approaches to solving problems. The strengthening of regional cooperation mechanisms in all small island developing States regions, especially focused on furthering implementation, will be critical. The early operationalization of the small island developing States Technical Assistance Programme and small island developing States/NET is of utmost importance.

25. Other areas that call for priority attention include waste management, given the absence in most small island developing States of the infrastructure, technology and space for dealing with solid wastes, including sewage, industrial effluents and ship-generated waste; land resources, in view of the mounting competition for the very limited terrestrial space among a variety of activities, notably human settlements, agriculture, industry and tourism and their impact on the environment; freshwater resources, particularly because of the grave shortages that small island developing States already face in that area; and the enhancement of national institutions and administrative capacity. Greater attention to enhancing small island developing States capabilities in science and technology will also be critical for the effective implementation of the Programme of Action. There is currently little evidence of the transfer of environmentally sound technologies to small island developing States.

26. The need to re-examine the trade policy orientation of the majority of small island developing States will assume ever greater importance given the

rise in competition for markets as a result of globalization and the simultaneous dismantling of preferential market access arrangements. The consideration of environmental issues in international trade will constitute an added dimension of their trade policy concerns. Despite constraints in developing feasible alternatives, many small island developing States will nevertheless have to seek new areas of export in which would they have potential comparative advantages. For small island developing States with a well developed tourism base, the development of quality tourism products will become increasingly important as they try to reduce reliance on mass tourism. In addition to local problems of land rights in the case of the Pacific island countries, a number of small island developing States face problems of infrastructure and inadequate air transport links with the main tourist generating centres, all of which will need to be addressed in the short and medium terms.

27. At its fourth session, in 1996, the Commission adopted a number of important policy recommendations to cope with the immediate priorities of small island developing States, in particular calling for the establishment of an informal open-ended working group in the context of the International Framework of Action of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, to examine the mapping of strategies for disaster reduction in small island developing States; targeted research in several critical areas, including the role of telecommunications and insurance in disaster mitigation; assistance in improving basic infrastructures in small island developing States; financing of telecommunication development; and the development of sustainable commercial energy in small island developing States.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

28. At its fourth session, the Commission carried out an in-depth review of a number of issues that are covered by chapters II, IV, VII, VIII and XII of the Programme of Action and by section C, subsections 1 and 2 (Finance and Trade) of chapter XV. At its sixth session, in 1998, the Commission may wish to consider conducting a review of all the remaining issues. To that end, the Commission may wish to request the Secretary-General to prepare reports on those issues through the system of IACSD task managers.

29. In paragraph 117 (b) of the Programme of Action, the Commission has been requested to recommend specific modalities for the full review of the Programme of Action in 1999. The Commission may wish to recommend that:

(a) The Commission itself carry out the full review;

(b) Immediately after the sixth session of the Commission, national authorities, regional intergovernmental bodies and the United Nations system commence preparations for the full review by updating the previous reviews of all chapters of the Programme of Action with the aim of undertaking a comprehensive assessment of progress in implementation since the Conference;

(c) The meeting of the Commission's Ad Hoc Inter-sessional Working Group in 1999 begin the process of the full review, should the work of that body continue after 1997.